

# **Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks**

## **Preliminary Plan for Using the Benchmarks:**

*Aligning, Integrating, and Creating Strategies and Tools  
To Promote School Readiness*

***Working Draft***

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## ***Introduction***

### ***Vision and Goals***

The Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks were created with the following goals:

- To promote reasonable expectations and practical strategies for parents and others who care for and teach young children to support their learning and development;
- To contribute to a unified vision for the early care and education system in Washington state;
- To create a continuum of learning that links early development to later success in school and life by aligning the Benchmarks with Washington State's Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) and K-3 Grade Level Expectations (GLEs).

The vision underlying the Benchmarks is that young children in Washington be prepared for success in life and in school.

### ***How Benchmarks Can Be Used***

As described in the UNICEF *Going Global Project* (Kagan & Britto, 2004), early learning benchmarks can be used in a variety of ways, each of which contributes to the integration and quality of early childhood care and education services, supports, and infrastructure. At one level, benchmarks may have direct effects on children. For example, insofar as benchmarks outline what young children should know and be able to do, they may be used to improve the experiences that young children have with their primary caregivers – parents, families, and early childhood professionals (e.g., child care providers, pre-kindergarten teachers). At this level, benchmarks may be used to inform parents, improve classroom instruction, and improve diagnostic screening of young children. At another level, benchmarks may have more indirect effects on children. For example, benchmarks may be used as the basis for the preparation and training of teachers, as the basis for formal evaluations of early care and education program quality, and as the basis for communications that help to increase public knowledge about the status of young children. Regardless of the nature of the utilization of the benchmarks, the ultimate beneficiaries are young children.

To this end, any set of Benchmarks, including the Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks, can be viewed as a “bank” of information from which different benchmarks could be “withdrawn” for a specific use (Kagan & Britto, 2004). For example, Washington State could decide to use some of the Benchmarks to communicate developmental and learning expectations to parents. In this case, a sample of the Benchmarks, with some drawn from each domain, would be used. Alternatively (or additionally), Washington State could elect to use the Benchmarks as the basis for designing a new approach to teacher education. In this case, many of the Benchmarks could be used to drive the development of a new professional development curriculum. The point is that the Benchmarks can be used for a variety of purposes, including:

- I. Promote and Support Parent/Primary Caregiver Knowledge and Skills
- II. Promote and Support Instruction in Early Care and Education Programs
- III. Promote and Support Early Childhood Teacher/Professional Preparation
- IV. Promote and Support Continuity of Learning Expectations into Elementary School
- V. Promote and Support Public Knowledge of Children's Development and Increase Public Investment
- VI. Promote Statewide, Public-Private Efforts in Supporting Early Learning

### ***Guiding Principles Related to Use of the Benchmarks***

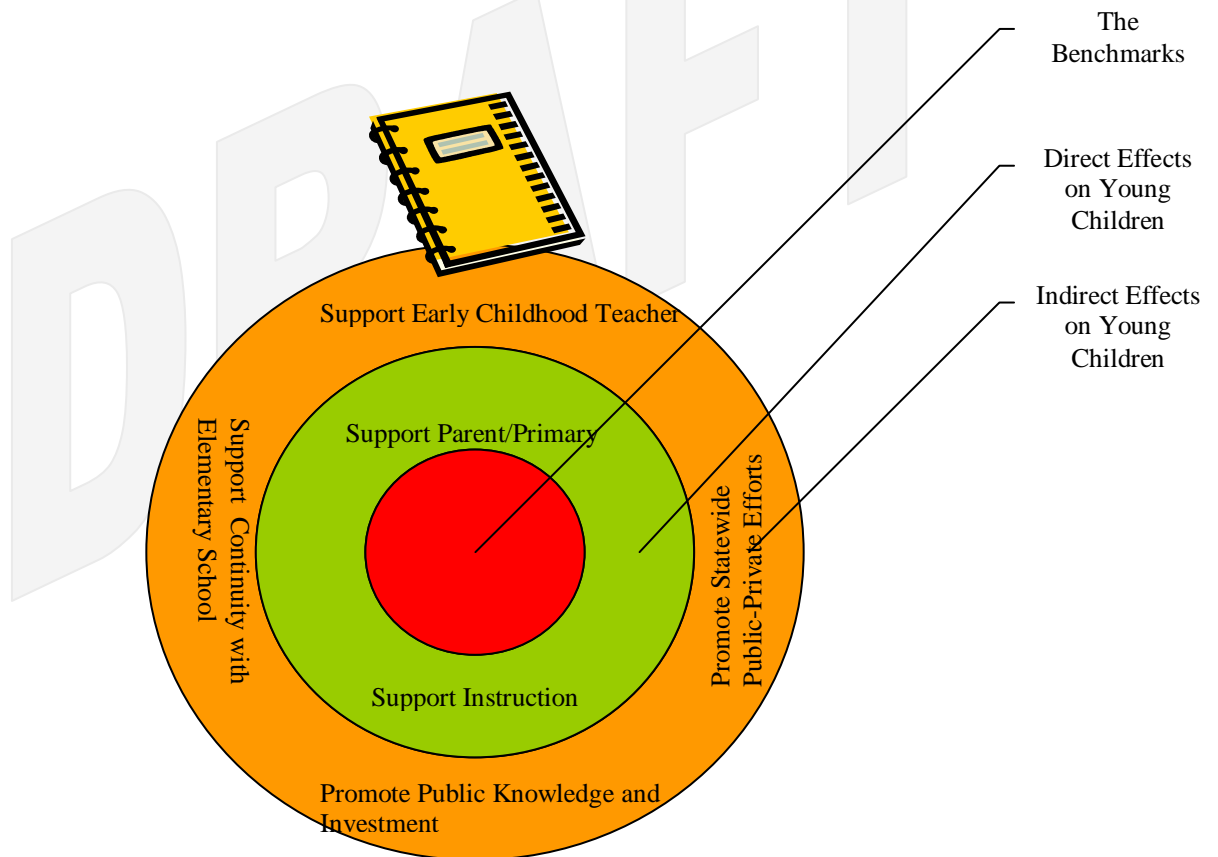
When the Benchmarks were being developed, the Core Team, the Advisory Panel and the Benchmarks authors agreed on a set of principles to guide the Benchmarks' content and development, and their implementation and use. These Guiding Principles are included in the introduction to the Benchmarks themselves. The following are the principles related to use of the Benchmarks.

- *The well-being of children and respect for families should be given the highest priority in the implementation of the Benchmarks.* Families are their children's first, most important, and lifelong teachers, caregivers, and decision makers. Family involvement should be seen as essential to implementing the Benchmarks.
- *Benchmarks should be used to enhance and augment children's development, early childhood program design, and family practices.* The Benchmarks should be used as tools to help young children, families, early childhood teachers, and early learning programs excel. Benchmarks should not be viewed as tools to criticize, exclude, or punish children, teachers, programs, families, or communities.
- *The Benchmarks should be used judiciously and for the specific purposes for which they were developed.* The Benchmarks are being developed for use by families and those who primarily work with children. If the Benchmarks are used for accountability, there should be safeguards in place so they are not used to track, retain, or label children.
- *The Benchmarks should be reviewed and updated at least every five years.* In order for Benchmarks to remain relevant, a systematic, interactive process should be set up for their periodic review and revision. The review must be conducted independently to ensure that it is fair and unbiased.
- *Implementation of the Benchmarks should be evaluated to ensure appropriate use by families, early childhood educational settings, and communities.* The results of the evaluation should lead to better use and implementation of the Benchmarks.
- *Adequate resources and technical assistance should be allocated to ensure optimal use and implementation of the Benchmarks.* Families, caregivers, teachers, and early child care providers should receive training in using the Benchmarks appropriately. This diverse group of users should be supported while they use and implement the Benchmarks at home and in early care and educational settings. Technical assistance should be provided to families and early learning teachers so they have appropriate

strategies for supporting children's development in the domains of development outlined in the Benchmarks.

### ***Approach in this Plan***

The intent of this document is to suggest strategies for implementing the Benchmarks so that they [a] meet one or more of their intended purposes; [b] reach their intended audiences; and [c] are used in diverse ways that ultimately support the early learning and development of children in Washington State. In addition to providing a comprehensive perspective on how the Benchmarks can be integrated into the everyday practice and work of a wide range of early childhood stakeholders, this document provides a series of stand-alone "mini implementation plans," with each one addressing one of the six purposes stated above. While each mini-plan may be implemented in isolation from the others, ideally, the six plans would be closely linked and nested together so that their purposes are coordinated and contribute to an integrated and comprehensive system of early care and education (see diagram).



## ***I. USING THE BENCHMARKS TO PROMOTE AND SUPPORT PARENTING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS***

### ***Rationale***

Raising young children is, first and foremost, the responsibility of their families. Families decide what is best for their children and choose the environments they believe will benefit their young children the most. Because, as the commonly used adage states, “babies don’t come with “how-to manuals,” the Benchmarks can be used in a manner that provides families and parents with guidance and information to recognize, understand, and nurture the growth and development of their young children.

Parents may use the voluntary Benchmarks in several ways. First-time parents will find them especially helpful as they observe their children’s development and watch them learn over time. In addition, parents can use the Benchmarks to learn what to expect from their children at certain ages and how to help their children learn important new skills.

### ***Goal***

The goal of implementing the Benchmarks to improve parenting skills and behaviors is ultimately to help family members:

- Support their children’s learning and development;
- Develop and sustain reasonable expectations for their children; and
- Establish and strengthen continuity between children’s experiences at home and in early learning settings.

### ***Audiences***

The primary audiences for this use of the Benchmarks are: parents, families, and professionals and organizations who serve families—family support, parent educators, pediatricians, R&Rs, parent groups, faith organizations, etc.

### ***Components***

Effective and successful use of the Benchmarks to support parenting knowledge and skills requires several key components:

- An outreach plan to inform parents and other family members of the Benchmarks and related resources;
- A series of family-friendly activity kits that provide practical, low-cost suggestions for nurturing young children’s learning and development;
- Tools and materials for professionals who teach parent and family education workshops and classes that accurately covers the purpose, content, structure, and potential family uses for the Benchmarks (including What to: keep doing, stop doing and start doing); and
- An appropriate evaluation component to ensure that the parent outreach efforts are: [a] meeting their intended purposes; [b] reaching all parents who desire more information



about their children's early development and learning; and [c] evaluating impact on parenting knowledge and skill

### *Guidelines and Special Considerations*

The growing diversity of families with young children in Washington State highlights the need to ensure that any parent education and involvement efforts match the needs, values, and goals of various groups of parents (e.g., ethnic and cultural groups, teen parents, single parents). Because parents are a diverse audience, there are a number of special considerations:

- Research shows that programs for parents alone do not influence children's development as strongly as do programs that involve children directly (National Research Council. 2001). As such, any plans to improve parents' skills and behaviors should incorporate opportunities for parent-child interactions;
- Parent and family resources related to the Benchmarks should be published in a variety of formats (e.g., booklets, Web sites, CDs, brochures) that can be accessed by parents in urban, rural, and tribal communities;
- Parent and family information and resources should be provided in each family's home language as well as in English;
- Trusted professionals with whom parents have contact (e.g., pediatricians, resource and referral specialists, faith-based parent groups) should be engaged in the distribution of Benchmarks-guided information and resources (e.g., brochures, guidelines);
- A single point of contact should be established (e.g., a 1-800 phone number) for parents who have questions about the Benchmarks.

### *Next Steps*

An effective and comprehensive plan to use the Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks to support parenting knowledge and skills could be launched by:

- Convening a diverse work group of key stakeholders to spearhead the effort. This group should include, at a minimum: parents from diverse cultural, linguistic, socio-economic, educational backgrounds; parent educators; adult learning specialists; home visitors; pediatricians; resource and referral specialists; state agency representatives, and family support professionals.
- Asking the work group to consider the following questions:
  - **Who** (public and private organizations/agencies) is working in this area? Who could spearhead this use of the Benchmarks?
  - **What** information, tools or help will the audiences need in order to use the Benchmarks? **Who** could provide that?
  - **How** might organizations/agencies encourage use of the Benchmarks by these audiences (what steps might they take)?
- Securing adequate financial and staff support to ensure that the work group has adequate resources to:
  - Develop a plan
  - Design and test materials

- Revise plan and materials based on field testing
- Produce and disseminate
- Evaluate; and
- Incorporate findings in tools/plan
- Designing a parent/family strategy with a broad vision so that, even if Washington begins modestly, its efforts will be nested within a broader plan.

## ***II. USING THE BENCHMARKS TO IMPROVE CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS***

### ***Rationale***

While families are children's first and most important teachers, according to the Business Roundtable, 70% of young children under the age of 5 (including those with working parents and those with a parent at home) are in some form of early care and education setting on a regular basis. Teachers and other early childhood professionals face the important challenge of meeting the educational and nurturance needs of *all* children in their classrooms, centers, and homes. These professionals are being asked to respond sensitively and appropriately to a wide diversity of children's needs and to promote skills and knowledge that will help all children succeed in kindergarten and beyond. The Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks can help guide what teachers of young children should teach and, hence, what teachers need to know and be able to do to teach young children effectively. The Benchmarks can be elaborated to delineate specific strategies for supporting the development of particular skills and knowledge in early childhood teachers.

Caregivers, teachers, and other professionals in the early care and education system will be able to use the Benchmarks to: [a] better understand reasonable expectations for children's learning and development at various ages and access strategies and tools on how to support those processes; [b] develop a deeper understanding of what children need to know and be able to do that is sensitive to the diverse ways that children grow and learn; [c] select a research-based curriculum and program strategies that yield better results for children; and [d] promote a more unified approach to children's education as early childhood programs in different settings across the state work from a common set of Benchmarks.

### ***Goal***

The goal of implementing the Benchmarks to improve instruction in early care and education programs is ultimately to help all early childhood teachers and professionals (e.g., those people who teach in ECEAP, Head Start, Early Head Start, Even Start, early childhood special education/early intervention, private preschools, local district preschools, center-based child care, and family child care home providers):

- Support young children's learning and development by making their teaching highly intentional and purposeful;

- Consistently provide classrooms and contexts that support and enhance young children's experiences of the content articulated in the Benchmarks;
- Develop and sustain reasonable expectations for children; and
- Establish and strengthen continuity between children's experiences at home and in early learning settings.

### ***Audiences***

The primary audiences for this use of the Benchmarks are: early childhood professionals (child care and early learning teachers, directors, ECEAP, Head Start, preschools, etc.), child care resource and referral agencies, and trainers.

### ***Components***

The effective and successful use of the Benchmarks to improve instruction requires several key components:

- Widespread dissemination efforts to raise early childhood professionals' awareness of the Benchmarks, their intended purposes, and their potential utility for improving both classroom-based and home-based practice;
- Integrate Benchmarks into STARs training;
- Higher education classes, training sessions, workshops, and on-going professional development opportunities (e.g., reflective practice conversations) that support teachers in linking the Benchmarks with their curriculum development, thereby ensuring that children have rich and varied opportunities to learn in areas that encompass all five domains of young children's development and learning;
- Higher education classes, training sessions, workshops, and on-going professional development opportunities (e.g., reflective practice conversations) that help teachers relate the Benchmarks to their every day pedagogical activities and curriculum, including organizing the environment and routines so as to promote activities that support children's development and learning in all five domains;
- Higher education, training and support to help teachers, in partnership with the child's family, create informal child-level profiles, thereby providing a means to guide *individual* instruction;
- Education, training and support to help teachers, in partnership with other classroom teachers and aides, create informal class-level profiles, thereby providing a means to improve *group* instruction and assist in functional classroom planning;
- Companion guides to all early childhood curriculum for teachers that explain the teaching goals, alert teachers to common misconceptions, and suggest ways in which the curriculum can be used flexibly for students with different learning styles, developmental levels, economic and regional contexts, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds;
- Forums (e.g., on-going workshops or Internet communication groups, college classrooms) in which teachers using a common curriculum can discuss their experiences and share ideas for improving instruction;
- Professional development for directors and supervisors in ways to support staff;
- Look broadly at instructional practices designed for older children – how they may be adapted/modified to use with younger children? (i.e. skills about organizing information)

- Adequate incentives and financial supports to early childhood teachers and professionals to enable their participation in education, training and other professional development opportunities; and
- An appropriate evaluation component to ensure that the implementation efforts to improve instruction in ECE programs are: [a] meeting their intended purposes; and [b] reaching all teachers and early childhood professionals, regardless of geographic location or program administration.

### ***Guidelines and Special Considerations***

By design, to meet the diverse preferences of families in Washington, early care and education is delivered in a wide variety of contexts (e.g., center based and home based; urban, suburban, and rural; profit and non-profit). Because of this diversity, and in order to improve instruction across all early learning settings, there are a number of special considerations:

- In strengthening teachers' and early childhood professionals' approaches to young children's learning and development, the central role of the family should not be overlooked. Efforts to improve instruction should ***include an appreciation of the family's and community's role*** and provide strategies for collaborating with parents and families;
- Some teachers and early childhood professionals will have more comfort with and exposure to standards-based education. Those individuals who are school-based or have extensive experience following existing comprehensive program standards may be more comfortable with the Benchmarks. Other professionals will have less exposure to, and less professional development on, integrating standards into teaching practice. In order to effectively integrate the Benchmarks into daily practice and teaching in all early childhood programs, ***targeted documents and strategies*** will need to be developed for the various teacher audiences (e.g., "Using the Benchmarks to Strengthen Teaching Practice in Head Start Programs;" or "Using the Benchmarks to Nurture Young Children's Learning and Development in Family Child Care Homes");
- For a variety of reasons, including low compensation and benefit levels, there is very high staff turnover in early care and education settings. In order to ensure that all new teachers and early childhood professionals who are exposed to, trained on, and comfortable with the Benchmarks, a ***timeline for on-going professional development and mentoring opportunities for incoming staff*** should be established;
- Like children, teachers and early childhood professionals have different learning styles and strengths. Efforts to integrate the Benchmarks into the daily teaching practices in early learning settings should be delivered in ***multiple contexts and modalities*** and should provide ample ***opportunities for teachers to see effective teaching strategies in action***; and
- In order to provide children continuity in their learning and development experiences throughout early childhood, and in order to maximize education and professional development resources, efforts to use the Benchmarks to improve early childhood instruction should ***link with instructional training efforts in the public schools***, both conceptually and practically.

### *Next Steps*

An effective and comprehensive plan to use the Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks to improve instruction in early care and education programs could be launched by:

- Convening a diverse work group of key stakeholders to plan and spearhead the effort. This group should include, at a minimum: teachers and early childhood professionals from a wide variety of programs (e.g., ECEAP, Head Start, center-based child care, family child care, Early Head Start, Even Start, early childhood special education/early intervention, private preschools, local district preschools); resource and referral specialists who work on professional development issues; adult learning specialists; curriculum specialists; professional development developers and trainers;
- Asking this work group to consider using existing education and professional development-related organizations and networks (e.g., WAEPECP, Resource and Referral, Head Start, Washington Association for the Education of Young Children, K-12 schools) as a foundation for expanding professional development opportunities related to classroom instruction;
- Asking the work group to consider the following questions:
  - **Who** (public and private organizations/agencies) is working in this area? Who could spearhead this use of the Benchmarks?
  - **What** information, tools or help will the audiences need in order to use the Benchmarks? **Who** could provide that?
  - **How** might organizations/agencies encourage use of the Benchmarks by these audiences (what steps might they take)?
- Securing adequate financial and staff support to ensure that the work group has adequate resources to thoroughly develop a plan for the format, content, dissemination plan, and evaluation of using the Benchmarks to improve instruction in early care and education programs.

### ***III. USING THE BENCHMARKS TO PROMOTE AND SUPPORT EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER/PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION***

#### ***Rationale***

Formal education and training in early childhood development and learning has been linked consistently to positive teacher/caregiver behaviors. Over the past decade, more attention has been paid to the skills and knowledge necessary for early childhood teachers. The importance of teacher/caregiver knowledge of – and responsiveness to – children’s different learning processes, capabilities, and developmental goals points to the centrality of teacher preparation and education to ensuring a high-quality learning and development experience for all children.

In general, however, the field is still characterized by early childhood programs staffed by people with limited training and education. Clearly, the preparation and on-going

professional development of early childhood teachers and other professionals is central to the implementation of the Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks.

Higher education personnel and other trainers can use the Benchmarks to ensure that newly prepared early learning teachers – as well as teachers and early childhood professionals who participate in in-service professional development – understand the Benchmarks and how they can be used to strengthen their teaching strategies and the learning settings offered young children. That is to say, teachers can and should be familiar with the Benchmarks (e.g., what is expected for children to know and be able to do) and frame their pedagogical practice and content to that end. In order to achieve this, the content of the Benchmarks must become the basis for teacher preparation programs so that the Benchmarks frame what is being taught and the experiences that teachers offer in early care and education settings.

### ***Goal***

The goal of implementing the Benchmarks to improve early childhood teacher/professional development is ultimately to help higher education personnel and both formal and informal professional development trainers: [a] provide early childhood teachers and professionals with a stronger and more specific foundational knowledge of the development of children's learning and development based on the Benchmarks; [b] use the Benchmarks to drive the content of teacher preparation programs; [c] eliminate discontinuities between what is taught and what children are expected to know and be able to do; and [d] use the Benchmarks to drive the nature of state credentialing and, where appropriate, state licensing criteria related to teacher preparation.

### ***Audiences***

The primary audiences for this use of the Benchmarks are: higher education programs and faculty.

### ***Components***

An effective and successful use of the Benchmarks to improve early childhood teacher/professional preparation requires several key components:

- Establish a council for instruction
- Build capacity across the early care and education community
- A thorough understanding of the Benchmarks by Washington State leaders in early childhood higher education;
- The involvement and “buy-in” of faculty at two-year and four-year teacher preparation institutions, as well as professional development organizations and trainers who provide both formal (credit-bearing) and informal workshops and training to early childhood professionals;
- The establishment of courses of study (including course syllabi, workshop series, and learning modules) that are structured around the Benchmarks' domains, sub-domains and goals. These courses of study should be approved by the appropriate Training Approval Board(s) in Washington;

- The establishment of reviews for all additional training that is approved by the Training Approval Board to ensure that all in-service training efforts in the state are informed by the content of the Benchmarks;
- Provision for early childhood teachers and professionals to access education and training on the Benchmarks in places and ways that encourage and support their on-going participation. Provision of education and training should include distance learning strategies;
- The establishment of graduation and/or certification requirements that incorporate completion of courses of study related to the Benchmarks; and
- An appropriate evaluation component to ensure that the implementation efforts to improve early childhood teacher/professional preparation are: [a] meeting their intended purposes; and [b] reaching both two-year and four-year institutions as well as both formal and informal professional development and training organizations.

### ***Guidelines and Special Considerations***

Transcending the Benchmarks, early care and education professional development is at a crossroad. At present, early childhood teacher education tends to be an uncoordinated patchwork of pre-service and in-service education rather than a systematic continuum of opportunities leading to durable and transferable credentials. In order to effectively implement the Benchmarks to improve early childhood teacher/professional preparation, it is important to recognize and understand the complexities of the “big picture” of improving the training and education system of early care and education, including:

- Many early childhood professionals are reluctant to seek higher education. They generally are nontraditional college students and may need flexibility and support in order to succeed in higher learning. Toward this end, ***transfer and articulation agreements*** that allow the many early childhood professionals who do not hold degrees to build upon their past training to work toward higher levels of skill development and educational attainment should be considered;
- The research and application of research related to young children’s learning and development is continually expanding. Institutions of higher education and professional development organizations must find a way to ***update early learning faculty on the intentions and content of the Benchmarks*** (an application of research) and other current information and research related to early childhood programs and pedagogy;
- In-depth expertise on child development research is needed to be an effective instructor of early childhood pedagogy and practice. The early childhood professional development community must find a way to ***share fundamental and emerging developmental knowledge with large numbers of early childhood educators***, including those in rural and remote areas; and
- Progress toward improving the education and training of early childhood professionals based on the Benchmarks will require substantial public and private investment and support. Incentive systems including innovative educational programs, scholarship and loan programs, and compensation commensurate with the expectations of college graduates should be integrated into all plans.

### *Next Steps*

An effective and comprehensive plan to use the Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks to improve early childhood teacher/professional preparation could be launched by:

- Convening a work group of key stakeholders to spearhead the effort. This group should include, at a minimum: current early childhood teachers and professionals; administration and faculty at two- and four-year institutions of higher education; current early childhood distance learning providers; federal and state department of education officials; the business community; higher education accreditation bodies; resource and referral agencies; parents; teacher's unions; and representatives of the state's early childhood professional development system;
- Asking the work group to consider the following questions:
  - **Who** (public and private organizations/agencies) is working in this area? Who could spearhead this use of the Benchmarks?
  - **What** information, tools or help will the audiences need in order to use the Benchmarks? **Who** could provide that?
  - **How** might organizations/agencies encourage use of the Benchmarks by these audiences (what steps might they take)?
- Securing adequate financial and staff support to ensure that the work group has adequate resources to thoroughly develop a plan for the format, content, dissemination plan, and evaluation of using the Benchmarks to improve early childhood teacher/professional preparation.

## ***IV. USING THE BENCHMARKS TO PROMOTE AND SUPPORT THE CONTINUITY OF LEARNING EXPECTATIONS INTO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL***

### ***Rationale***

The work of many developmentalists, including Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, established a conceptual base that strongly suggests that children younger than age eight learn in different ways than their older peers. These developmentalists suggested that learning in the years from birth to age eight is distinguished from later learning and, as such, demands different and tailored educational experiences in order to maximize young children's development and learning. Because of the uniqueness of this period of development, many early childhood organizations, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), devote themselves to issues affecting children from birth to age eight. This age range includes not only the traditional field of early care and education, but also the early elementary school years of kindergarten through third grade (K-3), often referred to as the primary school years.

Despite this theoretical continuum, there is a serious mismatch between the expected qualifications, training, and compensation for those individuals who teach children 5-years old and older in kindergarten and primary school and those who teach children 4-years old and



younger in early learning programs. For example, many early learning professionals who work with young children – especially in child care programs – are not required to hold any degree or certification. In contrast, most K-3 teachers are required to hold at least a bachelor's degree and teacher certification or licensure, if they work in public schools. Despite these differences, both sets of teachers/professionals have a shared stake in the learning and development of children younger than age eight.

K-3 teachers, administrators, and specialists are not strangers to standards-based education. Indeed, standards have been an integral part of K-12 education in Washington State for a number of years. However, in order to provide a unified set of expectations for children's learning and development from birth to age eight, it is especially important for primary teachers to be familiar with the Benchmarks and to integrate into their own policies and practices the Benchmarks' principles and approaches to nurturing and supporting varied learning environments that support every child's learning. Conversely, it is critical for those who teach children younger than kindergarten age to be equally familiar with the learning standards that pertain to primary age children.

### ***Goal***

Part of the goal of implementing the Benchmarks to improve the continuity of learning is to help K-3 teachers, administrators, and specialists better understand how young children grow and develop. Additionally, primary teachers need to be very familiar with the expectations or Benchmarks for young children. The same is true in reverse; early childhood teachers should become familiar with the learning standards that pertain to primary-age children. The intention is that all educators will have a clearer understanding of the expectations that frame learning and development for children birth to age eight.

### ***Audiences***

The primary audiences for this use of the Benchmarks are: early childhood professionals and trainers; school districts; K-12 principals; kindergarten teachers; and Educational Service Districts.

### ***Components***

Effective and successful use of the Benchmarks to improve the continuity of learning into elementary school must include several key components:

- A series of documents that clearly show the linkages and continuity between the Benchmarks and Washington State's existing Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) for K-3 students;
- Strategies and mechanisms that support educational policies and practices on school transitions;
- Outreach to private schools and home-school community in Washington State to encourage the alignment of the Benchmarks to learning expectations;
- The provision of joint professional development, based on the content of the Benchmarks and the state's Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) and K-3 GLEs, for

K-3 education staff and early childhood professionals (in both school-based and community-based programs); and

- An appropriate evaluation component to ensure that all professionals who work with children from birth to age eight have a unified vision about the expectations for children's learning and development. When "appropriate evaluation" is developed, be sure to follow recommendations of NAEYC and NCATE.

### ***Guidelines and Special Considerations***

The standards-based emphasis in K-12 education, currently embodied in *No Child Left Behind*, has heightened the public's awareness of efforts to articulate and assess learning expectations for children. There is significant and, in many cases, warranted concern that the existing infrastructure that supports both the early learning field and K-12 education (e.g., program monitoring, teacher preparation, on-going professional development, wage and benefit structures) is not adequate to support effective implementation of standards. In order to effectively implement the Benchmarks to improve the continuity of learning into elementary school, it is important to consider the complexities of bridging the disparate "worlds" of early care and education and K-12 education.

In particular, Washington State's K-12 academic standards (EALRs) focus on traditional cognitive instructional subjects such as reading, mathematics, science, writing, communication, and social studies. EALRs also exist for the arts and health fitness. The Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks focus not only on traditional aspects of cognitive development, but also on social and emotional development, approaches to learning, and physical and motor development. Aligning across these different sets of standards should provide meaningful opportunity to expand the understanding of the comprehensive nature of young children's growth and development and encourage both the early learning and the K-12 fields to broaden their understanding and support of children in all five domains of development.

### ***Next Steps***

An effective and comprehensive plan to use the Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks to improve continuity of learning expectations could be launched by:

- Convening a work group of key stakeholders to spearhead the effort. This group should include, at a minimum: current early childhood teachers and professionals; current K-3 teachers, staff and administrators; parents; teacher's unions; administration and faculty at two- and four-year institutions of higher education; state department of education representatives; statewide private school associations; members of the business community; resource and referral agencies; and representatives of the state's early childhood professional development system;
- Asking the work group to consider the following questions:
  - **Who** (public and private organizations/agencies) is working in this area? Who could spearhead this use of the Benchmarks?
  - **What** information, tools or help will the audiences need in order to use the Benchmarks? **Who** could provide that?

- **How** might organizations/agencies encourage use of the Benchmarks by these audiences (what steps might they take)?
- Undertaking a “back-map” of K-12 standards to the Benchmarks. Once the Benchmarks were developed (based on solid scientific and professional evidence of the important learning and development goals for children from birth to kindergarten entry), an alignment document was created that each Benchmark goal and “looked up” to existing K-3 GLEs to identify linkages and continuity of expectations. The reverse process – back-mapping from existing EALRs and GLEs to the Benchmarks – will further help to define both the continuity across, and the differences between, expectations for children from birth through third grade;
- Completing an analysis of the alignment between the curriculum and assessments used in state-funded pre-kindergarten programs and kindergarten. Once the areas of continuity and discontinuity have been identified, launch efforts to better align the full scope of standards, assessments, and curriculum for young children from birth to age eight; and
- Providing guidance, resources, and technical assistance to early learning programs, K-12 schools, and communities to develop meaningful transition plans that facilitate children’s and families’ progress from one learning setting (e.g., community-based pre-kindergarten) to another (e.g., public school-based kindergarten).

## ***V. USING THE BENCHMARKS TO PROMOTE AND SUPPORT PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE OF CHILDREN’S DEVELOPMENT AND INCREASE PUBLIC INVESTMENT***

### ***Rationale***

In a democratic society, informed debate is the cornerstone of good public policy. To create informed debate, systematic and widespread public education is needed. As issues related to young children’s learning and development increasingly move into the public policy arena, there is a growing need to reshape the public’s knowledge of when learning begins and what constitutes learning. For example, beliefs that are at odds with scientific understanding – that maturation automatically accounts for learning, for example, or that children can learn concrete skills only through drill and practice – must be challenged. In addition, there is a need to improve the public’s understanding of the important role of families, communities, early childhood professionals, and other partners in promoting a strong and healthy environment that supports the learning and development of every child. The Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks provide concrete examples not only of observable children’s behaviors, but also of suggested interactive activities between children and adults, that can easily be adapted to build public awareness campaigns and other public relations strategies.

### ***Goal***

The goal of implementing the Benchmarks to improve public knowledge of children’s development is to increase parents’ and the general public’s awareness of the importance of providing stimulating learning experiences in the lives of all young children. Ultimately,

improved public awareness can result in not only improved public policies, but also empowered families and communities.

### ***Audiences***

The primary audiences for this use of the Benchmarks are: news media, individuals, and community, business, and faith leaders.

### ***Components***

Effective and successful use of the Benchmarks to improve public knowledge of children's development must include several key components:

- Be strategic as an overall group – be clear about where we're trying to go;
- Use concrete examples and marketing principles;
- Put pilots and test groups in place in family and community settings so we have examples to draw on;
- How do we measure our success for/from op eds, media work?;
- Promote choices;
- Integrate the Benchmarks into the *Born Learning Campaign*;
- A series of op-eds and public service announcements, informed by the Benchmarks, that can be disseminated via newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. These announcements should be tailored to the demographic profile of the communities in which they are released;
- Press releases and news conferences for journalists and reporters, and meetings with editorial boards, to increase their knowledge of early childhood development and their willingness to produce articles and segments that increase the public's awareness and understanding of children's growth and development needs; and
- An appropriate evaluation component to ensure that the public awareness efforts retain fidelity to the overall intentions of the Benchmarks and are reaching all geographic, cultural, and linguistic populations in the state.

### ***Guidelines and Special Considerations***

For the Benchmarks to be adapted in a manner to improve public knowledge of children's development, a number of special considerations must be addressed:

- To some extent, there is still ambivalence in society at large about the role of publicly-provided programs in young children's lives. Any effort to increase public awareness about children's development should include messages that are relevant to children who experience all kinds of care arrangements (e.g., those that are at home with a parent or relative, those in public community-based program, those in private programs); and
- Any public messages that address children's development must also incorporate the importance of stable and nurturing relationships with adults, the importance of high-quality early learning programs, and the importance of communities that support all young children and their families.

### *Next Steps*

An effective and comprehensive plan to use the Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks to improve public knowledge of children's development could be launched by:

- Convening a work group of key stakeholders to spearhead the effort. This group should include, at a minimum: parents; current early childhood teachers and professionals; representatives of the media; representatives of the business community; pollsters; communication specialists; representatives of state agencies; and
- Asking the work group to consider the following questions:
  - **Who** (public and private organizations/agencies) is working in this area? Who could spearhead this use of the Benchmarks?
  - **What** information, tools or help will the audiences need in order to use the Benchmarks? **Who** could provide that?
- Develop a media plan and campaign that disseminates public messages, based on the Benchmarks, about the importance, breadth, and depth of young children's learning and development.

## ***VI. USING THE BENCHMARKS TO PROMOTE STATEWIDE, PUBLIC-PRIVATE EFFORTS IN SUPPORTING EARLY LEARNING***

### *Rationale*

- State policymakers – and other decision makers – are increasingly interested in tracking state-level outcomes for young children so that they can initiate and support targeted policy, programs, and other actions that will improve the well-being of children and families. The Benchmarks can be used as the basis for creating a limited set of child outcomes for children from birth through kindergarten entry that can be tracked over time and that will help to identify important trends in the learning and development of young children in Washington State. Combining data on child outcomes from across the state can help signal to the public and to policymakers if policies and programs that are intended to support children and families are moving in the right direction. Monitoring various outcomes – or indicators – over time not only helps government and community leaders better understand whether or not families and communities have the capacity to meet the children's various needs, but also reflects state investments on behalf of young children and families. The Benchmarks are something new to our state that can help to bring all these entities and focuses together so that we can effect change for children.

State decision makers can augment the usefulness of the Benchmarks by analyzing how key child outcomes vary by community of residence, socioeconomic status, or racial and ethnic background. Based on these data, decision makers will be better able to engage in meaningful discussions and actions that support the learning and development of *all* young children.

## ***Goal***

The goal of implementing the Benchmarks to monitor state progress is to provide a reliable gauge of children's learning and development across the state of Washington and to provide a guide for policy and program development in order to support children, families, and communities.

## ***Audiences***

The primary audiences for this use of the Benchmarks are: child advocacy groups, United Ways, state agencies, legislators, and community leaders.

## ***Components***

Effective and successful use of the Benchmarks to monitor state progress must include several key components:

- Assuring formal recognition of the Benchmarks by the various stakeholders involved (e.g., a legislative resolution);
- Common data collection and analysis so we can monitor trends over time;
- Selection of a limited set of child outcomes to monitor over time that: [a] are relevant to the overall intentions of the Benchmarks; [b] can actually be measured over time at the state level; and [c] can be used to inform decisions about policies and programs;
- Common measurements of child outcomes and consistent data reporting mechanisms to enable information sharing and analysis across early childhood programs, state agencies, and geographic regions in the state; and
- An appropriate evaluation component to ensure that the efforts to monitor trends in state progress are in alignment with the Benchmarks intentions; are not being used to punish communities, families, or children; and are being used to inform state and local planning and policymaking. Are the Benchmarks put to use effectively? Have we made any difference by what we've done? i.e., are early learners making developmental progress?

## ***Guidelines and Special Considerations***

For the Benchmarks to be adapted in a manner to monitor state progress, a number of special considerations must be addressed:

- Avoid being simplistic;
- Create a process to look at policy and programmatic progress over time;
- Indicators that track trends over time cannot be used to establish causal relationships between specific interventions and outcomes;
- Measures must be relevant across all racial, cultural, and language groups in the state of Washington;
- Gathering data that informs policy and programmatic planning does not require assessing every child in the state. In fact, matrix sampling may be used and still produce reliable data that provide an overview of statewide trends; and

- Monitoring trends over time requires a long-term commitment to track the indicators, analyze the data, and create feedback loops into policy and program planning.

### *Next Steps*

An effective and comprehensive plan to use the Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks to monitor state progress could be launched by:

- Convening a work group of key stakeholders to spearhead the effort. This group should include, at a minimum: parents, staff from state departments, representatives of child advocacy organizations, legislators, researchers, community leaders, early childhood teachers and professionals.
- Asking the work group to consider the following questions:
  - **Who** (public and private organizations/agencies) is working in this area? Who could spearhead this use of the Benchmarks?
  - **What** information, tools or help will be needed in order to use the Benchmarks to monitor statewide progress? **Who** could provide that?

<to be added>

### ***VII. STRUCTURE FOR THE NEXT STEPS***

<to be added by next steps group>

### ***VIII. FEEDBACK AND REVISION OF THE BENCHMARKS***